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The Gospel and Australian Culture (Part 2)

The task of critical contextualization involves being “culturally-attuned” and allowing “the gospel to challenge and transform the culture” (Langmead 2002:1). Part 1 (see the 2010 *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 6, no. 2) of this article reviewed models of contextual theology, suggested an exegesis of Australia’s cultural trends and future directions, and reflected upon the gospel to be contextualized. Part 2 will now explore the next of Paul Hiebert’s four step process of “critical contextualization” (Hiebert 1987:109); Step 3, an analysis of convergence and dissonance between the gospel and Australian culture; and Step 4, suggestions for fresh symbols and rituals to communicate the gospel in forms indigenous to the Australian post-Christendom culture.

Points of Dissonance and Convergence

Identifying points of dissonance and convergence between the humiliation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ—to save people from sin and death, and to form his kingdom—and the complexity of Australia’s cultural trends, provides a frame for effectively confronting Australians with this gospel.

An increasing number of Australians say they have “no religion,” a decreasing number attend church or religious services, and only 6 percent of Generation Y raised without a religion later joined one (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:138). Engagement in the public practices of religiosity is not a core value of Australian society. Neither is there synergy between what Christians call holiness and sin, and an Australian’s sense of goodness and failure. Much that is an assault upon God’s character, reflected in his moral law, is acceptable practice—*getting away with it, having a good time, or living dangerously!* Evil is environmental vandalism and the violation of individual rights. While the justice and compassion of Jesus Christ is respected, and the service and volunteerism of Christians and churches valued—as well as their condemnation of communal sins such as racism,

materialism, and militarism—there is always the fear that the wowzers (an Australian derogatory word denoting people who sap all the fun out of any given situation) may impinge upon *having a good time*, even though that may involve destructive and high-risk behavior.

Generation Y are characterized by individualism, self-reliance, optimism, options, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and consumerism—all qualities that dull any “whisper in the mind” of sin or the need of a Savior (Bouma 2006:2). The status of their work—or the option to work if they choose—is being elevated as “a way of finding connectedness, community and meaning” (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:232).

At the same time significant points of convergence can be identified. The expectant and non-competitive distrust voiced in, *a fair go*—also heard in self-deprecating humor—suggests insecurity, *a shy hope*. Australians are familiar with the oppression inflicted upon convicts, migrants, the *stolen generation*, refugees, the elderly, and the poor. Many are familiar with brokenness, insecurity, struggle, an underlying sense of failure, and the need for reconciliation. There is also a sense that you must *do your time* for wrongs committed. At the same time, volunteerism and a readiness to sacrifice to rescue others is part of Australian culture.

While the Christian message has been imported with little attention to context, a biblical concept of God, his kingdom, and the apostolic concept of atonement and conversion is not entirely foreign to the Australian culture. And now, with globalization and multiculturalism contributing significantly to an emerging post-secular society, the idea of atonement is also found for it is within the multiple, growing Australian religions and indigenous spiritualities.

New Metaphors, Symbols, and Rituals of the Gospel to Confront Australian Culture

The countercultural model of contextualization seeks to communicate the message in ways that respect yet challenge the culture. The foregoing suggests new metaphors, symbols, and rituals, congruent with but distinctive from Australian cultural trends, with which to share the apostolic gospel of Christ’s humiliation, death, resurrection, and ascension—all necessary components to save people from sin and death, and to form his kingdom.

The New Testament writers chose a variety of metaphors from their context to explain this gospel. No one picture was adequate, for such may truncate or distort the meaning afforded by a variety. With explanation some of their metaphors—including sacrifice, reconciliation, and justification—still work in an Australian context. Others—such as covenant, Day of Atonement, Passover, redemption, and propitiation—are foreign

to most. A wider variety of metaphors from the Australian context, while remaining true to the centrality of Jesus Christ as “true God and true man” (McGrath 1994:51, 60), will provide a richer understanding, explanation, and experience of the gospel. New metaphors allying the gospel with radical dissent, restoration, and restitution (rather than reform and development), will be more challenging and consistent with the status-reversal of Jesus Christ.

New metaphors must confront the Australian view of sin, for the gospel is God’s response to sin and failure. Manning Clark believes there is an “Australian understanding of failure,” a conviction that no matter how hard we might try we are pretty much “bound to fail” (in Millikan 1981:23). Such failure colors Australians’ view of sin. Primal sins are societal or failures associated with the effects of convictism, materialism, and racism (Paproth 2005:2), and the mistreatment of indigenous people. But while failure produces individual despair and loss, what could be described as individual sin is often seen as *having a good time*, with both individuals and society resistant to the possibility of a good news meta-narrative of salvation. Fresh metaphors, symbols, and rituals must therefore confront failure and sin at each of these levels.

Metaphors of the Gospel

In spite of the pressures of work, family instability, rampant consumerism, and individualization, there is a high commitment to volunteerism and a *fair go* for all, evidenced in a willingness to sacrifice for others and the newly discovered national conscience for reconciliation. While a variety of “strands of the gospel” (Langmead 2002:7) within Australian culture illuminate the meaning of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, just four will be explored within the limitations of this article.

1. *Volunteerism*: “Australians do not like people who play the star” (Millikan 1981:15), but highly respect the volunteer serving others. Both point to areas of convergence with the apostolic gospel. Jesus Christ was certainly no star. Born into poverty, a friend of the outcasts of society, he was crucified as “a failed Messiah, a dead rebel, cursed by God” (Chalke and Mann 2003:17). The fact that this was the voluntary activity of God is consistent with the spirit of volunteerism, giving back to society and serving those in need. A God who defines himself in this way is the kind of God with whom Australians can relate.

God taking this initiative confronts Australians with two important realities that need redefinition: first, the positive value of people who were made in God’s image, and second, a redefinition of sin, for few would see sin in terms of desperate need, gasping for air, or being consumed by a bush-fire. Many “prefer to see themselves and their fellow Australians

as basically good and not particularly sinful,” and they react negatively to the condemnation of sinfulness (Cronshaw 2006:71). The prior biblical truth of people created in the image of God and pronounced “good” (Gen 1:31) is an essential preface to understanding the nature of sin and God’s initiative. His volunteerism is undeserved generosity and grace.

2. *Sacrifice for others*: Australian diggers, surf-lifesavers, firefighters, and others sacrifice their lives for their mates and strangers. Criminal attacks on city streets and tragic train or road accidents identify a willingness to be involved and to put self at risk for others. Indiscriminately saving or rescuing all in danger, whether friend or stranger, with personal sacrifice, even death, suggests an alternative to thinking of penal substitution as entirely grotesque. It is a terrible price to pay, but many Australians have paid that price—even for the folly of the careless. While such sacrifice does not encompass atonement, it again confronts the Australian attitude that sin has little personal implication, that it is simply *having a good time*, unavoidable failure, or community neglect. Sacrifice demonstrates both the high cost of sin and God’s radical love in setting out to rescue us from threatening disaster while knowing the cost, even while we were totally oblivious to the danger.

It must not be overlooked that atoning sacrifice is increasingly a part of Australian consciousness. Many migrant community structures are molded by systems of payback and retribution, with their unique understandings of sacrifice, including animal blood sacrifice. Aboriginal spirituality and heritage also speak of such atonement and salvation, as in *The Ten Canoes* (de Heer 2006). These stories of sacrifice provide a frame to explore the concept of an atoning sacrifice, devoid of the idea of appeasement on our part, as the gracious initiative and gift of God. His sacrifice for others is a display of indiscriminate love.

3. *A fair go for all*: While condemned to a life of punishment and privation, convicts demanded “a fair crack of the whip” (Cronshaw 2006:47) when facing punishment for their crimes or misdemeanors in the colony. *A fair go* does not minimize wrong, although convicts sought to do just that, and there is a common perception that they were all regular family people treated harshly for taking half a loaf of bread to feed their children. It is the expectation that all be treated fairly—even for their drunkenness, brawling, or immorality—with a fair balance of justice and mercy from those judging and those metering out punishment.

Although Australians could hardly be described as egalitarian, they do expect all to receive *a fair go*. However, this confronts discrimination, even in mate-ship; and it demands God also be given *a fair go*—that his character not be vilified. His way of providing *a fair go for all* by taking the whip himself, not only confronts the Australian sense of *being a man* (even

if a woman!) by *taking on the chin* whatever is coming to us, but it also exposes the heinous nature of sin. That the crucifixion of God was the *fair go* we deserve, to ensure we get the *fair go* he deserves, is confrontational to the extreme. However, with many Australians now coming from shame-honor cultures, increasing numbers appreciate the idea of the vindication of a person's justice and honor, including God's (see Rom 3:25, 26). The embrace of his justice and mercy becomes our *fair go*.

4. *Reconciliation*: One of the most pressing issues in the Australian context is that of reconciliation. The systemic denial of the mistreatment of indigenous people exacerbated tensions and erected barriers. While resistance remains, there is today an overwhelming acknowledgement of the need for reconciliation, a willingness to say "Sorry," and recognition that there is a cost to pay to those offended. Reconciliation also speaks to those whose lives are impacted by high divorce rates and single parenting statistics. Darren Cronshaw sees reconciliation (making up and being on friendly terms with God and others) as "a more relevant New Testament metaphor of salvation" for Australians than "the image of washing guilty stains in Christ's redeeming blood" (Cronshaw 2006:71).

Although God is the offended party he takes responsibility to put us in right standing with himself. He pays the costs of retribution, removes the offense, and fully restores the relationship. The grace and willingness to forgive displayed by many indigenous people, even though they have suffered indescribable hurt, provides a model of Christ's willingness to suffer derision and death, to pay the cost himself to effect reconciliation, and to readily forgive the wrong inflicted upon him. But, many Australians find it difficult to accept the offended as a fully restored part of the family, in a similar way that many refuse to identify fully as God's adopted and restored family. And, the legacy of churches involved in perpetrating the hurt, may "impair the communication of the good news" (Hunter 2003:225) both for indigenous people and others. However, forgiveness provides a context for healing and a future "not limited to the outcomes of the past" (227). God's initiative has provided full reconciliation, including retribution, forgiveness, and healing—and he is the offended party!

These four metaphors of the gospel are countercultural in that they thoroughly engage and are part of the Australian context while remaining suspicious of it, challenging this worldview with an alternative.

Metaphors of the Kingdom

Fresh metaphors for "the kingdom of God" are also needed, for the idea of a kingdom with king and subjects is foreign to most Australians. God's kingdom is radically different, established upon the principle of cruciformity—based neither upon rank, status, majority vote, nor toler-

ance. Other metaphors could be chosen from sports, the outdoors, mate-ship, Australian's disrespectful and self-deprecating humor, sexuality, or iconic messianic figures, but four that arise from the Australian context include the following:

1. *God's kingdom is like a multicultural society*: The diversity, yet harmony, of Australian society is a powerful metaphor of God's kingdom—diverse, but one! While the Jews of Jesus' day defined God's kingdom by their national borders, Jesus Christ shifted the boundaries to encompass Gentiles, the cursed and despised, the weak, and the powerless. Not without pain, Australia has become one nation but with a plurality of cultures, ethnicities, languages, and religions—receiving asylum seekers, welcoming economic, political, and religious refugees, and honoring indigenous peoples. Significant factors have facilitated this gathering of scattered and diverse people, including the "Australian institution of giving others a 'fair go'" and the constitutional framework of tolerance, equality, and free speech based on "the rule of law" (Bouma 1997:ix). While the apostolic gospel honors and validates God's character and the eternal nature of his moral law, it is on the basis of cruciformity that all become one kingdom in Christ Jesus. Many Christians are also challenged by this metaphor, for not all want all those encompassed by God's grace included.

2. *God's kingdom is like the "new women"*: To suggest that Australia is post-feminist "does not mean that the feminist movement has run its course, but rather that feminist presuppositions are now generally accepted in society" (Roennfeldt 2003:36). Debate among Christians over the role of women is incomprehensible to Generation Y and can be a reason for their rejection of church. While recognizing differences, Generation Y take the equality of sexes for granted. Women can take any role in society with equal pay, but also expecting respect and consideration from their partners, employers, and society in their roles of motherhood. All barriers have been broken down. Post-feminism is entirely consistent with the scope of God's kingdom modeled by Jesus Christ who broke down all boundaries by his death and resurrection. This is a radical, dissenting metaphor for "new women" represent the alternative worldview established by the gospel, calling for a deconstruction of church models of male headship and dominance.

3. *God's kingdom is seen in the Aboriginal worldview*: Like some metaphors Jesus used, this one challenges. The purpose is not to suggest that the Aboriginal worldview is Christ-centered, for it is not, but to affirm the interface of Australian society with Aboriginal culture and some elements of God's kingdom evident within. Aborigines have a different way of creating meaning and have no separate word for the religious as a distinct dimension of living, not unlike Generation Y's use of the word spirituality.

Celebrations and festivals are occasions “when Time and Eternity become one” (Goosen 2000:118, 119). They like to be in touch with wind, rain, sun, and sky. They are uncomfortable inside rooms and buildings. Sacred places are outdoors—rivers, waterholes, rocks, and trees. Such spiritualities create opportunities to learn from each other, with invitations for believers in Jesus Christ to learn from people whose spirituality is not tied to monumental buildings, just as New Testament believers saw God unfettered by man-made symbols of power and authority while they cultivated cruciform models of *ecclesia* designed to reflect the gospel story of status-reversal, sacrificial love, grace, and forgiveness.

4. *God’s kingdom is like the Choir of Hard Knocks*: This choir of homeless and disadvantaged people was the 2007 Melbourne creation of Jason Stephens and singing director, Jonathan Welch, who had started a similar Sydney choir. While the motivation was “a television project,” recruiting was “by word of mouth” and the name a reference to “the school of hard knocks” and “learning by experiencing, not through classrooms” (The Choir of Hard Knocks 2008). People from the fringes of society received acclaim and acceptance, singing traditional songs such as Amazing Grace, Silent Night, as well as pop songs. Trust and affirmation cultivated community, and addictions were challenged. In the same way, the disadvantaged are recruited and accepted for God’s kingdom by word of mouth. His cruciform love accepts the marginalized and transforms.

Symbols and Rituals

Just as the biblical metaphors of the gospel and kingdom came from society and culture, so the symbols and rituals of their faith were also from the everyday. Because life with God was to be everyday, the closer these relate to the path of life, the more pervasive and revolutionary they would be. It is not surprising then that washing and eating (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) were chosen as symbols, reminders from everyday life, of their relationship with God. The power of these symbols is lost when they become religious ceremonies confined to a spiritual compartment of life.

Cultural trends point to significant symbols of God’s engagement with Australians, suggesting symbols and rituals of the gospel and kingdom. The regular and proactive cultivation of these symbols would provide powerful representations of the gospel and kingdom of God:

1. *Days with symbolic meaning*: Just as the apostles chose national and religious festivals, such as Passover and the Day of Atonement, and just as Christmas and Easter were borrowed from culture and adapted to express the essence of Christian faith; so days with a rich Australian heritage could illustrate and challenge Australians with the gospel and God’s kingdom. Five such days are ANZAC Day (April 25), National Sorry Day (May 26),

World Environment Day (June 5), Ash Wednesday, and Black Saturday (February 7). There is a sense that God meets Australians on ANZAC Day, a national memorial of sacrifice and loss, mate-ship and national identity. The National Sorry Day acknowledges the wrong done to the *stolen generation*, as well as the wider mistreatment of Aboriginal people, and points to reconciliation and healing, providing a powerful symbol of the gospel. The United Nations' World Environment Day provides Christians with an annual *Sabbath* for creation, an opportunity to do something tangible about environmental concerns, while establishing a fresh symbol of salvation.

Ash Wednesday (the first day of Lent) has represented repentance for some Western Christians for many years, but with the fires of 1983 it took on new meaning and is now, with Black Saturday, February 7, 2009, a memorial of extremity, courage, sacrifice, loss, and preparedness for many Australians. These memorials provide dramatic experiential symbols of the gospel.

2. *Outdoor worship gatherings*: Millikan complained that the times and forms of worship services in Australia do not relate to the circumstances or climate (Millikan 1981:77, 78). The sense that God meets Australians in the outdoors, congruent with both their solidarity with land, sea, and sky, and the biblical stories of Jesus' ministry outdoors suggests that the bush and beaches could present an environment for worship that speaks more clearly of the gospel story of creation and re-creation than man-made buildings. It would be radical for churches to be planted outdoors, but consistent with the Australian culture as another environment for exploring and experiencing the gospel.

3. *Hospitality—meals and the Lord's Supper*: Ross Langmead argues that "the recovery of community," "the practice of hospitality," and "the centrality of embodied life together" are at the heart of Australian longing and culture, as well as the gospel (2002:7). These reflect commitment to love one another, the grounded reality where "the holy is valued and time slows for people to get back in touch with each other and the sacred" (2002:7). By feeding thousands and eating with people from all walks of life Jesus Christ dismantled cultural and status boundaries and cultivated his kingdom community. By choosing the bread and wine of the common meal, albeit from the Passover table, he chose symbols from the everyday to represent the cruciform nature of God. Hospitality shared became the environment for the revolutionary declaration that Jesus is Lord and affords a regular symbol of the gospel and kingdom for today. The simplicity of the evangelistic methodology that Jesus taught—eat with people, heal them, and together experience God's kingdom (Luke 10:8, 9)—is being rediscovered by believers today and the Lord's Supper is again be-

coming part of the everyday meal shared with friends.

Another symbol to be explored could be contemporary expressions of Jesus washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17), perhaps expressed in regularly caring for an elderly person, a pensioner, or a homeless person. Such symbolism, fostered by Christians in a community, would change the life of society and fittingly represent the gospel and God's kingdom.

Story-telling and Praxis

Australians are suspicious of religious and political spin. They are pragmatic and direct. Metaphors, symbols, and rituals must be direct, providing a frame for the story of Jesus to be told, however, church practice must reflect this story.

First, *the story of an Australian Jesus must be told and retold*. Of particular relevance to this paper is the level of belief among Generation Y that Jesus is "truly God and rose from the dead." While 16 percent are definite that Jesus was not God and 28 percent "undecided," 56 percent affirmed belief (Mason, Singleton, and Webber 2007:95). While it can be projected that this level of belief will fall; and while this level of belief may reflect the faith of migrant families rather than conversions to Christianity, this is clearly a significant area of convergence for the apostolic gospel with Australia's emerging culture.

The New Testament Jesus is recognizable within the Australian cultural environment—one who belongs and who connects with ordinary people. Like the New Testament Jesus, the Australian Jesus joins in the revelry of family celebrations, engages with women and children, breaks the rules of the religious hierarchy, connects to people outside institutional churches, is passionate in his condemnation of abusive forms of evangelism, uses sarcasm, vitriol, and laconic humor, and evidences a "self-effacing reserve" (Millikan 1981:111), yet he represents God and goes to church sometimes. Jesus Christ may even be like the mythical Australian from the harsh outback, as one out of the Judean wilderness. But, as a person, Australians have shaped him as "one of their own" (Goosen 2000:60). The story of his sacrifice to save or rescue is consistent with this picture.

Second, *the church needs to embrace its disestablishment*. The National Social Science Survey of 1993 revealed that overall Australians are quite positive towards church, although they do not attend. Twelve percent were very positive, 38 percent were moderately positive, and 25 percent were undecided (Hughes, Thompson, Pryor, and Bouma 1995:91). Also, a relatively high percentage of Generation Y is not negative towards church and, if they have attended, have found it welcoming, although boring. Unfortunately, the freedom, individuality, and color of Australia's culture are rarely reflected in Australian Christianity. While many Generation Y

could identify with the revolutionary nature of the message and life of Jesus Christ, thus confronting them with the apostolic gospel, some church language, postures, and structures suggest a judgmental superiority that neither appeals to them nor reflects the cruciform nature of the gospel.

A contextualization of Australian theologies and experimentation in ways of gathering, worshipping, expressing community, and “contextual engagement in mission” will be enhanced by churches voluntarily and enthusiastically embracing the reality that they are not part of the establishment. Freed of the need to conform to societal models, churches will more clearly discern what their gospel says to the Australian culture, and Australians will see this gospel lived out in “culturally-attuned and yet counter-cultural” ways (Langmead 2002:7-8). Such disestablishmentarianism would provide the most radical, confronting, countercultural, and offensive metaphor of the apostolic gospel and God’s kingdom.

Conclusion

Countercultural contextualization is not particularly subtle. But it takes both the constantly changing context and eternal gospel seriously. It demands that fresh metaphors be continually sought, to speak to the demographic and cultural trends, to engage and confront. This will not necessarily effect a wholesale acceptance of the gospel for the message of Jesus’ humiliation, death, resurrection, and ascension to save people from sin and death for this gospel will always prove scandalous to some and foolishness to others (1 Cor 1:23). However, it transforms, for it takes from the context to change that context, providing a prophetic challenge; it “expands our understanding of the Gospel because we now see the Gospel through a different cultural lens”—a hermeneutic challenge; and it changes those sharing “because they will not be the same once they have become part of the body of Christ in a context different from their own”—a personal challenge (Whiteman 1997:6). This dialogue between the gospel and Australian cultural trends must therefore continue.

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